DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 214 182 CS 206 791

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TITLE A Composition Curriculum Based on James Britton's Theories.
PUB DATE Mar 82
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (33rd, San Francisco, CA, March 18-20, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Curriculum Development; Curriculum Guides; *English Curriculum; *Language Arts; Learning Theories; Program Descriptions; Secondary Education; *Writing (Composition); Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS Bay Area Writing Project; *Britton (James); Theory Practice Relationship

ABSTRACT

In 1979, the Yonkers Public School district (New York) launched a project to design and implement secondary school language arts curriculum guides with an emphasis on written composition. A theoretical framework was developed, based on the work of James Britton and the philosophy of the Bay Area Writing Project (BAWP). Britton's work provided the framework for the three types of writing in the curriculum--expressive, transactional, and poetic--and supported the design committee's position that writing is a process. As stated by Britton and practiced by the BAWP, students should be given the opportunity to write for a variety of purposes and audiences. While the curriculum was designed to be sensitive to the developmental nature of writing, the committee also provided activities and objectives that would prepare students for the mandatory New York state competency test in writing. The objectives and activities of the curriculum cover the writing process, the three kinds of writing, paragraphs and sentences, and usage and mechanics. Inservice training sessions were conducted and members of the curriculum committee continued to monitor the implementation of the curriculum. Feedback from the program has been positive as teachers come to realize that Britton's way of looking at the composing process is more like the natural development of the process and that students address many of the program's objectives every time they write. (HTH)

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A Composition Curriculum Based on James Britton's Theories

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In September 1979, the Superintendent of the Yonkers Public Schools launched a project to design and implement curriculum guides for grades nine through twelve. Those teachers developing the High School English Guides were charged with the responsibility of setting up a program of instruction that would improve the students' skills in all areas of the language arts; however, written composition was identified as the area most in need of attention. This need was documented through interviews with all the parties involved in the learning process: teachers, parents, administrators and, of course, students. Based upon the input that the English Curriculum Committee received, a decision was made to establish a curriculum with two strands, writing and literature, but with the focus on writing.

It should be noted that the High School English Guides were designed to follow a highly structured, skill oriented Middle School Language Arts Guide that was developed a year earlier. Using current theory and research on the composing process, the two of us who formed the writing subcommittee for the high school guides worked toward the development of objectives and activities that focused on the writer's purpose and audience rather than on isolated writing skills.

We developed a theoretical framework that built upon two rather different, yet complementary, sources: the work of James Britton (1975, 1978) and the philosophy of the Bay

Area Writing Project. At the time the guides were developed, one of us was working on a dissertation that relied heavily on Britton's work and the other was a fellow of the Bay Area Project. We sought to build upon goals and concerns which we had in common.

Britton's work provided the framework for the three functions or types of writing that were covered in the curriculum. The three functions which Britton identified were the expressive function, which is personal writing that is close to the self; the transactional function, which is writing that is designed to accomplish a task; and the poetic function which is writing that attempts to create a construct or "work of art."

The subcommittee also used Britton's work to support its position that writing is a process and that students need to explore that process by writing for a variety of audiences other than the teacher. In Britton's study of thousands of pieces of school sponsored writing, he found the great majority of the writing was produced for the audience of "teacher examiner." Martin (1977), who worked with Britton in England, put it this way, "We think that one reason for the great amount of inept writing produced by school students is that the natural process of internalizing sense of audience, learned through speech, has been perverted by the use of writing as a testing or reproductive instrument" (p. 160).

Of course, one of the guiding prinicples of the Bay

Area Writing Program is that students should be given the opportunity to write for a variety of purposes and audiences because people learn to write by writing. Those who have attended Bay Area sessions probably remember that they wrote during every session and that they shared that writing with a variety of people who offered feedback on it. We attempted to create an atmosphere in which students write for others and give and receive feedback. To that end we provided suggestions to assist teachers in setting up writing groups that would allow students to share their writing. The first four objectives of the program (See list that follows) reflect the theoretical and practical bases of our curriculum.

While our curriculum was designed to be sensitive to the developmental nature of writing ability as explained by Britton, we also felt compelled to provide activities and objectives that would prepare students for a competency test in writing that all students in New York State are required to pass before graduation. However, rather than include objectives that recognized the developmental nature of writing ability within a structure designed to prepare students for the competency test, we chose to do the reverse. We included objectives and activities to prepare students for the competency test, within the structure of Britton's model of the development of the composing process. The complete list follows.

WRITING OBJECTIVES

The Writing Process

1. To recognize writing as an ongoing process with different stages.
2. To write for a particular audience and purpose.
3. To effectively revise and edit one's own work.
4. To offer constructive feedback to others in a class writing group.

Information Acquisition

5. To produce writing that uses information that has been gathered from various spoken and written sources.

Expressive Writing

6. To write entries in a journal at least twice a week.
7. To keep a writing log.
8. To review journal entries with the possible aim of restructuring them for other audiences and purposes.

Transactional Writing

9. To write an eyewitness account in chronological order.
10. To write a report based on a personal experience.
11. To write a report based on information supplied in random order that demonstrates an effective plan of development.
12. To write a directed or thematic narrative for a stated purpose.

* 13. To write a composition that makes a generalization based on at least two pieces of supporting evidence.

* 14. To write a carefully developed, reasonable argument that results in a generalization.

* 15. To write compositions, personal letters, and business letters that define a course of action that a willing audience could easily follow.

* 16. To write a composition that attempts to influence an audience to undertake a course of action.

Poetic Writing

17. To write sketches with acceptably narrow focuses on a variety of subjects.

18. To write an essay that reveals personal feelings, thoughts or emotions.

19. To write a short, one-act play or skit that shows an awareness of dramatic conventions.

20. To write a poem which demonstrates that poetry is a means of expressing emotions or ideas.

21. To write a short story with a limited focus that effectively blends the elements of plot, character, setting and mood.

Effective Paragraphing

* 22. To write a unified paragraph that includes a topic sentence and supporting details.

* 23. To write one or more paragraphs that demonstrate a logical plan or pattern or organization.

* 24. To write a paragraph or paragraphs that use transitional devices to achieve coherence.

Effective Sentences

25. To use sentence combining techniques (addition, deletion, embedding) to explore the possibilities of language and to create more effective sentences.

* 26. To practice revising sentences to improve clarity, economy, emphasis, and variety.

Effective Diction

* 27. To use words that are appropriate for the audience and purpose.

28. To differentiate between the connotation and denotation of a word as well as use words with appropriate connotations.

* 29. To differentiate between formal and informal language and use each appropriately.

30. To use dictionary and thesaurus to improve diction.

31. To master and use words on grade-level vocabulary lists.

Correct Usage

* 32. To correct, in one's own work, sentences which have grammatical problems in any of the following areas: a) sentence structure, b) agreement of subject and verb, c) agreement of pronouns and antecedents, d) use of the forms of regular and irregular verbs, e) the use of modifiers that "dangle", f) use of adjectives and adverbs, g) the differentiation between commonly confused pairs of words.

Mechanics

* 33. To correct, in one's own work, sentences which have mechanical problems in punctuation, spelling or capitalization.

The feedback that we have received thus far from the first semester that the program has been in progress has been encouraging, if not completely positive. Teachers were upset by "more terms," but an introductory workshop helped teachers to realize that there was nothing threatening in our approach; rather, they came to realize that Britton's way of looking at the composing process is more in keeping with the natural development of the process.

Another concern expressed by the teachers was that there was "too much" contained in the objectives. This resulted from the teachers' belief that in writing, as in many other fields, one objective is covered in one lesson or unit. Teachers had to realize that students address many of the objectives-- sometimes as many as half of those on the list, every time they are asked to write, but that it might take some students weeks or even years to "master"

some of the objectives on the list.

The third, and most serious, concern that teachers expressed was the concern that the objectives were "too difficult" for survey (non-academic) students. Many teachers felt that there was not enough emphasis on grammar-- what the students really need. If we believe, as Flower (1979) suggested, that the writing of basic writers is not necessarily "worse" than that of competent writers but simply less developed, those basic writers needed more opportunity to develop their writing, not just opportunities to learn grammar.

For each of the objectives that appears above, activities to implement those objectives were developed by a group of experienced teachers. Our feeling was that teachers should be encouraged to use, as much as possible, activities that they have found successful. In service training sessions were held and members of the original curriculum committee continued to work out of the central office to monitor the implementation of the curriculum. While all conclusions must at this time be considered tentative, our feeling after nearly one year of feedback from teahers who are using the curriculum, as well as from other professionals who have been exposed to it at various workshops and conventions, is that we have a curriculum with a sound theoretical base. Any faults with the curriculum seem to stem from our implementation of the theories on which it is based.

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